

# ON RELATIVITY

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## 1. THE CONVERGENCE OF IMAGINARY REALITIES

An encounter between two people in Berlin.

Werner has been shopping. Earlier in the garden he harvested vegetables. Now he needs sausages from the supermarket for the barbecue. He noticed a woman shopping who put the products she wanted to buy in her own bag instead of putting them in her shopping cart – he informed a sales lady. Later, after he had left the store, two men block his path, one of them grabs him and, holding on to him, screams at him. A passer-by thinks that he is a shoplifter. Werner is seventy-six years old and he is now hard of hearing. He is afraid of the increasing street violence. When it gets dark he stays at home because he's afraid of being mugged. He still has the thirteen centimetre long switchblade from the garden in his pants pocket. The man falls to the ground.

It's Maxim's birthday. His wife and his two year old son have organized a birthday party on their terrace. His wife tells him that she had been treated like a shoplifter in the supermarket earlier. Maxim and a friend of his get up from the birthday party table and go to the supermarket to clarify the matter. Maxim is thirty, a social worker and hip-hopper. He is actively involved in combating the increasing street violence and he's experienced in mediating conflicts. They see the man on the street who apparently complained about Maxim's wife. They call out to him and ask him what happened in the store. The knife plunges into his heart.

The plea of the state attorney and the court decision is “not guilty” following paragraph 33 of the German criminal code which states: “If the accused exceeds the limits of self-defence due to confusion, fear or panic, he is not to be punished.” The counsel for the co-plaintiff asks whether he indeed could have “reacted differently or stabbed somewhere else than directly into the heart?”. “The pensioner and the hip-hopper encountered each other in a situation that both had always tried to avoid”, the state attorney said. “Each had made an image of the other that did not correspond to reality” noted the psychologist in his testimony.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Berliner Zeitung, 25th Feb 2004

## 2. THE ABSOLUTE GALILEAN SHOCK

When we go in search of this reality we can find : the reality of this story consists, firstly, of an (within the narrative level) undeniably real death, and, secondly, of an imaginary reality of shoplifting, and thirdly, the imaginary reality of yet another theft, fourthly, of the imaginary reality of a mugging, and fifthly, of the imaginary reality of a murder – which has since crystallized into a metaphor on the home page of the hip-hopper’s fan club.<sup>2</sup>

And the supposedly objective, impartial observer participates zealously in such imaginings and is thus of no use as a witness: you were there, and that’s why you are biased. But we, the newspaper readers, were not there and experience the Galilean shock while reading: the loss of the absolute, the divergent oscillation between perspectives (Galileo recognized in 1632 that it is impossible to tell if a ball on board a ship is moving or at rest, and thus invented relativity). The passer-by was perhaps just as uninvolved as we were, but in contrast to us he does have a non-oscillating perspective particular to him; but nevertheless he perhaps senses already the seismology of our shock.

We know from Galileo that not only our own perspective is subject to the condition of relativity, but that at the same time it also comprises a necessary basis of our description of the world: we are forced to take a perspective in order to possess an origin. Only under logical reference to such an axiomatically established reality can we distinguish between facts and suppositions, between imagination and experience, between interpretation and material. All these attributions are only valid within a specific circumstance, and they are transformed by each and every change in the system of reference. One can even imagine that two equally valid systems contain each other reciprocally as fictions, as narrative, although no integrating framework for both perspectives exists or is possible: the encounter between Werner and Maxim leads to a catastrophe only because both imaginations interfere with each other destructively (quite on the level of literal meaning), and it is impossible to tell both stories simultaneously, although we can understand both of them, and thus we oscillate as fast as we can, both realities combine to form an opaque emulsion – there is no solution (the definition of tragedy).

But although all imaginary realities are constructed realities and thus less stable than the alleged “real” reality the psychologist refers to, nevertheless, in contrast to it, they are actual (as in the German *Wirklichkeit*, meaning they are “wirklich”, they take action, they have a *Wirkung*, an effect), they build our contact with reality (the German *Realität*, meaning the unaccessible, independent outer reality), and they are thus effective and powerful, they act reciprocally upon other realities

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<sup>2</sup>[www.maxim-rip.de](http://www.maxim-rip.de)

and overwrite them with real physical power: here in the irreversible power of death.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. ENGRAVING

In the Net there are videos of scenes from the computer game “America’s Army”. The game has been praised for its quality, particularly for being realistic, since it was published by the army itself. But here what is realistic is, at the most, the medial separation of death and its physical concretion – the battles are as real as the bite of a yapping pup. There’s death everywhere, but no blood. All the graphic devices used in the game tell the story of its harmlessness – the stereotypical movements of the figures, the smooth, well-composed acoustic scenery. At the same time everything is unbelievably spectacular, with flames bursting from the barrels as they fire, and those hit flailing their arms theatrically before they fall to the ground.



FIGURE 1. Screenshots from *America’s Army* - [www.aafiles.com](http://www.aafiles.com)

What distinguishes the reality of the war from the reality of the game is the complete absence of the spectacular. This was proven most eloquently in a video film broadcasted by the station ABC that was taken from an American helicopter in Iraq. The video shows how three enemy combatants (as we are led to suppose) were killed. The pilot of the helicopter gunship sees three Iraqis with a large weapon and, consequentially, shoots them, one after the other. We are never told what object they were “actually” carrying, and that is irrelevant to the reactions of the pilot. As soon as he assumes that the object is a weapon, the justification to eliminate them is given. But why do we watch the countless shootings of the computer game with much less terror than this little film? Because it is more capable of representing reality? No. Because we believe it.

<sup>3</sup>The German language possesses two words for reality: *Realität* (a Gallicism) and the more common Germanic *Wirklichkeit*, which is semantically closer to the English word actuality. These two terms allow to alternate between the notions of *Wirklichkeit* and the adjective *wirklich*, which both suggest an action or effect (*Wirkung*), and the more purely conceptual notion of reality and real. Here *Wirklichkeit* is what is real because it has actually happened within the perception of a subject (and thus is constructed and imaginary), *Realität* is what is real because it is purported to be so

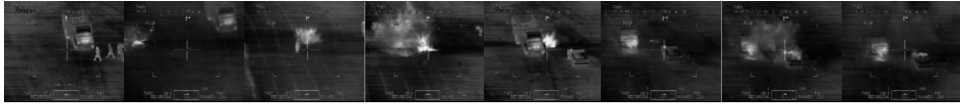


FIGURE 2. Videotape from the gun camera of the U.S. Apache helicopter showing three suspected Iraqi insurgents with what the helicopter pilot believes is a weapon - [www.abcnews.go.com/sections/WNT/US/apache\\_video\\_040109-1.html](http://www.abcnews.go.com/sections/WNT/US/apache_video_040109-1.html)

An indispensable quality of the game is hyper-perfection. Much as the performance of an actor could not be appreciated if it were perfectly embedded into experiential reality (who can tell a passer-by from an actor playing a passer-by unless the actor does not act exactly as a common passer-by, and actors do just about everything so that we don't forget for a single second that we are not seeing the figures themselves but the actors who are playing them – and that's why we love them and pay for them), so, too, the quality of a computer game could not be appreciated if the simulation were perfect, and if the helicopter pilot in his VR-helmet actually thought he was in a real helicopter, if he believed he was killing real enemies.

The reality of the game player sitting in his armchair, who is in a position to enjoy the dexterity of his own fingers and the aesthetic power of the optical and acoustic stimulation, and who knows, as the pilot does not, that he is sitting at home – this underlying reality, continually ratified in consciousness, is a constitutive part of every experience of a computer game. The actual model that was supposed to be attained and even superseded here through interactivity was not the military service in Iraq, but the cinema film. If we were only to imagine the manner in which this functions (perhaps motivated by the question why the “real” army has put so much effort and money into a game), if the “genuine” pilot were the one who was to be optimised and rid of the consciousness of his own corporeal vulnerability, if they thus succeeded in making it possible for the really real helicopter pilot to act in absence of all fear yet with the adrenalin necessary for this type of activity, as though he were only imagining himself in a realistic situation while continually sensing the comfort of his own home arm chair, well, at last the quasi real-virtual army would have balanced the decisive advantage characterising many of the enemy to date, an advantage we train ourselves in by proxy at home: fearlessness in the face of death.

As a rule we feel secure in front of our computers, in the cinema with its mediating technologies and in the theatre where the physical presence of actors could at least theoretically bring with it the danger of an incalculability (thus we dislike sitting in the first row); we feel secure because we know the difference between purported reality and factual reality – and we don't spend much time in search of the actual reality (to the contrary: we go to the movies in order to yield ourselves up to

the purported reality and we are disappointed if the film is not able to absorb our attention completely; if the goal of actually overwriting reality is achieved, art disappears, and we are similarly disappointed).

#### 4. TRANSCENDENTAL DECOHERENCE

Juscha has a lot to tell about herself. She was approached by a theatre asking her to let them use her apartment for a project that would also include herself and her partner Christoph. “We’re crazy people ourselves, and we are always ready to get involved in something crazy”, Juscha said in a television interview. The spectators pay admission to visit a number of private apartments in Berlin.

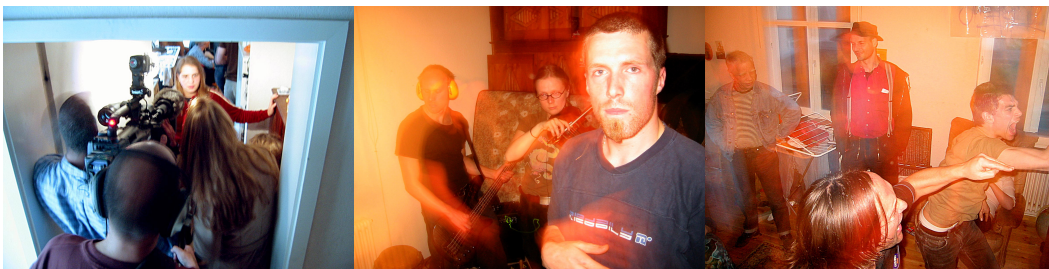


FIGURE 3. **a rose is:** *machone* @ *X Wohnungen*, Hebbel am Ufer Berlin 2004

Some actors move into Juscha’s apartment for the duration of the experiment and play-act at communal living. They cook and clean: really; they argue and make love: in play-acting. This presents the visitors with an emulsion of play-acted life and a living exhibit. Nevertheless, the acting of the actors disappears in the reality that it itself has created. Those who don’t believe that it is an invented and purported reality don’t see the actors, they see only the inhabitants and they ask themselves and Juscha: your communal apartment is nice, but where’s the theatre? Everything becomes real. Those who don’t believe that this is Juscha’s reality, and not merely her purported reality but her actual reality as it was found, think that she and everything else is merely acted, and they don’t let themselves be misled by anything (everything becomes art). The play of irony is self-reproductive and inexorable, a pathologically neurotic attitude absorbing everything else. It appears impossible to free oneself from this vortex without help. And once sown, the distrust cannot be combated with therapy, however intensive (for the massiveness of the therapy necessarily confirms the dangerous hypothesis: the assumption of the opposite is not desirable here because it’s true...). But here the matter is (supposedly) clear: the apartments are genuine, and their inhabitants, too. To discover a purported reality in so much genuineness requires an intent and aesthetic energy.

Once taken, a perspective can develop an almost invincible gravitation, like picture puzzles in which we at first can only recognise amorphous structures until we are suddenly and immediately torn towards a state of cognition: without really wanting to we now see something, a figure that was not there before and from which we cannot escape again. We add a meaning to the as yet unchanged structure and can no longer reconstruct the former state of ignorance, however much we may try, and however much we may be convinced that our construction of meaning is of a virtual nature, that the things we believe to see don't exist outside our perception: they are actually there.



FIGURE 4. Calf or what? Pop out effect: when the “rule” is found, all of a sudden you see what the picture represents, and from there on, you cannot go back to your original blindness - [www.psychology.bangor.ac.uk](http://www.psychology.bangor.ac.uk)

The brutality of our sense-searching, sense-yielding glance. Interpreting is showing, but often the finger bores through the exterior skin. The battles flaming over the power of interpretation: whoever looks is right. The gaze of others is merely a continuation of my defining glance (avant-garde? It's no surprise that this name is so militant. The avant-garde are those who run ahead and track down any enemy in order to destroy them. We chop the path free. We strike, without compromise. We are grave. We engrave our meaning into the surface of things, into the flesh, into the insides. The troops following behind find everything tattooed. – The romantic dogs make due with aromas, that would be too watery for us, we insure ourselves at Hermes against the whatever and however, the anything goes – the German word *Belieben* sounds as if it were “equipped with love”! But we are tough, art is pain, and not an *Unterhaltung*, a pastime entertainment containing the word *Unterhalt*, the fulltime income, but then it's not art at all, and also *Haltung*, a “position” or “posture” below (*unter*) which we don't want to be found – the world is ultimately well ordered like everything real: we're on top, you're below, we're in front, you're behind – everything else is imaginary and thus too complex for us).

## 5. THE REALLY METAPHORICAL WAR

Galileo and our longing for the absolute are irreconcilable, and nevertheless we must mediate both: we couldn't stand an absolute reality and we fail in absolute autism. We need a real ground behind the imaginary reality and don't want to accept any comprehensive reality: we are in search of an actual reality, of the factually real, of that which is. We want to know. We experience the Galilean shock and suffer the disappearance of the absolute as a lost.

In our Galilean shock we must decide in order to continue to live. Before we direct ourselves to the world outside we must accept a reality, take up an inertial position we can call our own, that we are allowed to call our own and must call our own: we can, indeed we must ourselves be the centre of the world; what we see is reality, it is the only truth available to us. But we must not think it is real, for whoever thinks he knows what is real, thus defining the facts, throws bombs and is then surprised that his reality is damaged.

The real reality of death makes us fall silent and tremble: it is the strong motor and the explosive fire bomb for our imagination – we want to survive. Therefore, what is art supposed to do? Fall silent and tremble? Writing manifestoes against the bad in the world and for the good in us? Erecting a comprehensive imaginary reality, an artistic utopia of good humanity, a cyber-room of integrating world views? Careful! Here we are close to the greatest danger for art, which art itself gave birth to: the metaphor.

We recall: the imaginary reality of the people, the metaphor of purity, is active through its consistence (not only during the holocaust). The imaginary reality of the territory, the metaphor of the holy land, is active through its consistence (not only in Palestine). The imaginary reality of the class struggle, the metaphor of the progress of humanity, is active through its consistence (not only during Stalinism). The imaginary reality of decadence, the metaphor of globalisation, is active through its consistence (not only in terrorism). The imaginary reality of threat, the metaphor of evil, is active through its consistence (not only in war). The list can be continued.

Consistent metaphors threaten us because we trust them. Consistent metaphors rob us, they rob us of our ability to act because we empower them. Consistent metaphors kill us.

What can art do? It shall do what it can: kill consistent metaphors.